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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that for gifted students, college planning should be one step in a life development process that takes place between 7th and 12th grades. Characteristics of gifted students that affect their college planning include multipotentiality, sensitivity to competing expectations, uneven development, ownership of their abilities, dissonance, taking risks, and a sense of urgency. To help resolve the problems encountered by gifted students, the following areas might be considered: self-exploration, academic planning, effective work/study skills and time management, decision-making skills, intellectual and social/emotional enrichment, and learning about colleges. Learning about colleges involves seven steps: (1) gathering information, (2) planning and choosing, (3) making two visits, (4) applying, (5) interviewing and writing an essay, (6) applying for financial aid, and (7) making acceptance decisions. The application process can be looked on from two points of view--that of the gifted student and that of the admissions officer. Admissions officers look at the academic rigor of the student's high school program; standardized test scores, including Subject Test results; extracurricular activities; and community service. Some schools also require an interview and an essay. Persuading a college or university to choose them requires students to know how to present themselves so that an institution will recognize them as a good match. Part of that presentation is based on what they know about themselves; part involves what they learn about how colleges make selections. (A list of college-planning Internet resources is appended.) (LPP)

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# College Planning for Gifted Students

Sandra L. Berger ■

**Abstract**

College planning is a major event in the lives of many families. For gifted students, college planning should be one step in a life development process that takes place between 7th and 12th grades. Characteristics of gifted students that affect their college planning include multipotentiality, sensitivity to competing expectations, uneven development, ownership of their abilities, dissonance, taking risks, and a sense of urgency. To help resolve the problems encountered by gifted students, the following areas might be considered: self-exploration, academic planning, effective work/study skills and time management, decision-making skills, intellectual and social/emotional enrichment, and learning about colleges. Learning about colleges involves seven steps: (1) gathering information, (2) planning and choosing, (3) making two visits, (4) applying, (5) interviewing and writing an essay, (6) applying for financial aid, and (7) making acceptance decisions. The application process can be looked on from two points of view—that of the gifted student and that of the admissions officer. Admissions officers look at the academic rigor of the student's high school program; standardized test scores, including Subject Test results; extracurricular activities; and community service. Some schools also require an interview and an essay. Persuading a college or university to choose them requires students to know how to present themselves so that an institution will recognize them as a good match. Part of that presentation is based on what they know about themselves; part involves what they learn about how colleges make selections.

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## Introduction

College planning is a major event in the lives of many families. For many students, the college-planning process is a finite event that begins and ends arbitrarily and abruptly. The onset of this process is typically participation in the National Merit Scholarship Program during 11th grade. The ending is marked by the receipt of a letter from the schools selected by the students, typically during the second semester of the student's senior year in high school.

Between these benchmarks, students must select colleges they want to attend, participate in a number of standardized achievement tests, and submit applications. For many students, the information they are able to gather during the 11th grade and the 12th grade is sufficient to make decisions. For gifted students, however, a much longer process is often typical. They are concerned about and begin planning for college as early as 7th grade. They tend to make short mental lists that swing from one extreme to another: "brand name" colleges, such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford, and popular state or community colleges. With each school year, their "angst" increases. For gifted students, because of their characteristics, college planning should be one step in a life development process that takes place between 7th and 12th grades.

## What Characteristics of Gifted Students May Affect College Planning?

*Multipotentiality*

Multipotentiality is the ability to develop a wide variety of aptitudes, interests, and skills to a high level of proficiency. Many of these students have heard over and over again: "You can be anything you want." But that ability is precisely the problem. These students are highly capable and participate in a variety of activities. Their calendars present an intimidating display of appointment dates and times.

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Parents anxiously await the day their children will get a driver's license. Many of these adolescents wonder how they will be able to make college and career plans when, on the surface, they like everything and are good at everything.

On vocational exploration tests, these youngsters often show a high, flat profile; that is, high aptitudes, abilities, and interests in every area. For example, Betsy is a multipotential gifted student. As a high school senior, she had boundless enthusiasm for everything and an endless supply of energy. Her interests included psychology, creative writing, language, physics, chemistry, jewelry making, fencing, bicycling, nature, science fiction and "people." The lead cross-country runner in her senior class, she also topped the class in college aptitude tests and the advanced placement English examination. She had a strong desire to be of service to humanity, and she wanted to master 12 languages before she turned 40.

Vocational preference tests are of little value to students like Betsy because they cannot help them discover what they are unable to do. In addition, they provide only limited insight into the exact content of different fields. How does Betsy begin to make a career choice? Students like her experience vocational selection as an existential dilemma. They are as concerned about the road not taken as they are with finding the "right" path. Choosing to be a linguist means giving up a career as a physicist. Furthermore, carried into the college setting, an attempt to participate in everything may create a destructive academic and emotional environment for her.

*Early emergers and late bloomers.* Some multipotential youngsters fall into one of two career-planning groups: early emergers, who select careers at a very early age, or late bloomers, who delay career selection well into adulthood. Some early emergers select careers early in life out of what might be termed a "calling" or sense of mission (e.g., musicians and dancers). Others seem to arbitrarily select a career at a very young age, perhaps to avoid dealing with the overwhelming multitude of career options available to them. Having too many choices can be threatening. Some gifted people do not find their calling until midlife. They may move from job to job or have several careers in their lives.

Voltaire's apt observation that anything is better than boredom is a creed for these gifted students. In order for them to be happy with their work, they must be constantly learning. When they have learned all that they can or want to learn in one position, it is time to move on to new challenges. For both these groups, college and career planning must be structured around the concept of choice and multiple options. Students should understand that career decisions are not irreversible, and they should set broad long-term goals. Ultimately, many of these students will "invent" their careers; they will make choices that are either interdisciplinary or not available during high school because the state of the art has not sufficiently progressed.

*Sensitivity to Competing Expectations*

Sensitivity and receptivity are great assets, and they permit a student to be receptive to imaginative, creative ideas. Like multipotentiality, however, these characteristics can be a mixed blessing when students plan for college and a career. Heightened sensitivity is often accompanied by heightened vulnerability to criticism, suggestions, and emotional appeals from others. Often, others' expectations for talented young people compete with their own dreams and plans. Delisle (1982) in particular has pointed out that the "pull" of an adolescent's own expectations must swim against the strong current posed by the "push" of others' desires and demands.

Parents, relatives, friends, siblings, teachers—all well-intentioned—are eager to add their own expectations and observations to the bright students' intentions and goals. The dilemma is complicated by the numerous options within the reach of a highly talented student: the greater the talent, the greater the expectations and outside interference (Kerr, 1990).

*Uneven Development*

Many researchers, counselors, educators, and parents are aware that, in general, the gifted student's level of social and emotional maturation may not keep pace with his or her advanced intellectual development (Buescher, 1985; Kerr, 1981; Manaster & Powell, 1983; Silverman, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c). They may find it difficult to set long-term goals.

Highly gifted students often have difficulty finding others like themselves. Consequently, it should not be surprising that establishing social relationships,

a skill that is acquired through peer contact, may not be developed to the same degree as their intellect. Furthermore, their predisposition toward intellectual growth may actually get in the way of social and emotional development. Some emotionally immature students may be significantly lacking in perspective and objectivity. They may think abstractly but be totally unreflective (Buescher, 1985). These traits may compound the difficulty in making decisions and setting long-term goals. According to one counselor interviewed, the students see these inconsistencies in themselves and feel frustrated, but they do not know what to do. They need help in sorting out which aspects of their lives they can control and which they cannot.

*Ownership*

Talented adolescents simultaneously "own" and yet question the validity and reality of the abilities they possess. Some researchers (Olszewski, Kulieke, & Willis, 1987) have identified patterns of disbelief, doubt, and lack of self-esteem among older students and adults: the so-called "impostor syndrome" described by many talented individuals. While talents have been recognized in many cases at an early age, doubts about the accuracy of identification and the objectivity of parents or favorite teachers linger (Galbraith & Delisle, 1996). The power of peer pressure toward conformity, coupled with any adolescent's wavering sense of being predictable or intact, can lead to the denial of even the most outstanding ability. They may have difficulty owning their abilities because often it is subtly implied that they belong to parents, teachers, and society. The conflict that ensues, whether mild or acute, needs to be resolved by gaining a more mature "ownership" and responsibility for the identified talent.

*Dissonance*

By their own admission, talented adolescents are often perfectionists. They have learned to set high standards and often to expect to do more and be more than their abilities might allow. Childhood desires to do demanding tasks perfectly become compounded during adolescence. It is not uncommon for talented adolescents to experience real dissonance between what is actually done and how well they expected it to be accomplished (Buescher, 1991). Often the dissonance perceived by young people is far greater than most parents or teachers realize and affects their willingness to take intellectual risks.

*Taking Risks*

While risk taking has been used to characterize younger gifted and talented children, it ironically decreases with age, so that the bright adolescent is much less likely to take chances than others. Why the shift in risk-taking behaviors? Gifted adolescents appear to be more aware of the repercussions of certain activities, whether these are positive or negative. They have learned to measure the decided advantages and disadvantages of numerous opportunities and to weigh alternatives. Yet this feigned agility too often leads them to reject even those acceptable activities that carry some risk—for example, advanced placement courses, stiff competitions, public presentations—where high success is less predictable and lower standards of performance less acceptable in their eyes.

*A Sense of Urgency*

The director of a regional talent search program described the way some gifted students react when they think about college planning: "Part of being bright is feeling you have to have closure on any kind of decision process . . . . [Some gifted students believe] 'if I sit down today and think about what college I'm going to go to, tonight I have to know'" (T. Buescher, personal communication, August 1987). Some gifted students are eager to find solutions for difficult questions and are inclined to make difficult but immediate decisions about complex problems. Their impatience with a lack of clear-cut answers, options, or decisions drives them to seek answers where none readily exist, relying on an informing, though immature, sense of wisdom (Buescher, 1987). The anger and disappointment when hasty conclusions fail can be difficult to cope with, particularly when less capable peers gloat about these failures.

**What Options Might Resolve the Problems Encountered by Students?**

*Learning about Oneself*

The years from the beginning of 7th grade to the end of 12th grade are turbulent times for gifted adolescents. During this critical period, these students need to identify their strengths, develop accurate and realistic self-concepts, use their talents in constructive, satisfying ways, and develop an appreciation for community. Guidance

counselors and parents can assist by understanding the complexity of the task and providing information, resources, support, and encouragement.

During middle school and the early years of high school, self-assessment inventories and appropriate career development strategies can assist students in learning about themselves. These inventories and strategies should be selected to match the unique characteristics of the students. An academic plan, effective work-study habits, a time-management system, and decision-making skills will assist students to establish a sense of direction and set realistic goals. Teachers can provide instruction in effective writing skills to assist students in clarifying thoughts and discovering the meaning of their experiences. Involvement in community life can provide a sense of personal satisfaction. Exposure to a broad range of academic subjects, intellectual ideas, and social situations assists students in learning about themselves through a variety of experiences.

Career exploration, a self-discovery process, will help students understand the relationship between school and careers, become familiar with realistic career options, set short- and long-term goals, and plan for the future. Since many of these students will invent careers, the help they receive from school and home should be open-ended and sensitive to the conflicts experienced from others' expectations.

*Academic Planning*

Some gifted students will be attracted to highly selective colleges—schools that reject more applications than they accept. The most selective colleges look for evidence of high student motivation and achievement—good grades in very demanding courses. They expect to see Advanced Placement (AP) courses on the student's transcript, if provided by the high school. Planning for advanced courses must begin as early as the 8th or 9th grade, especially in the case of sequential courses such as mathematics, because the progression to AP calculus requires several years of prerequisite courses, beginning with algebra. The same kind of planning is necessary for languages and sciences. Some students will not be ready or able to begin a mathematics, language, or science sequence by 8th grade. In such cases, courses offered in summer or correspondence courses sponsored by regional talent search programs may be a viable option.

*Effective Work/Study Skills and Time Management*

Most gifted students are able to interpret and define meanings far in advance of their age-mates. School is relatively easy for them until 7th grade (or even beyond). There has been no need to learn to study effectively or manage time wisely. These students often underestimate how much time will be needed to do homework in a demanding program. When truly challenged late in high school or college, they may discover that they do not have the skills needed to organize, study, and produce high-quality work. By high school, students should be taught the "habits of mind" required by careers in the sciences, humanities, and other fields. A problem-based approach is frequently the most successful method of teaching study skills.

*Decision-Making Skills*

Decision-making research emphasizes convergent thinking skills such as careful evaluation of data, rational evaluation of alternative solutions, making judgments, and testing solutions (Kolb, 1983; Maker, 1982). These skills are second nature to some gifted students, but they need to be taught to others. One highly flexible model that works well with gifted adolescents is the Creative Problem-Solving (CPS) Model (Parnes, 1975).

In college planning, good decisions require good decision-making skills and good information. When the number of options are infinite, the following can provide some structure:

- Know something about himself or herself; be able to use personal experiences to set personal goals.
- Recognize and define the decision to be made: school courses to take, how to select a college academic major, colleges or universities to consider.
- Assess and evaluate the information obtained.
- Assess the information by asking: "What facts and ideas are missing?"
- Generate strategies to acquire additional information.
- Gather additional information, facts, and ideas related to the goal.

- Assess the advantages, disadvantages, and consequences (risks and costs) of each alternative.
- Develop a plan or strategy to obtain the desired goal.
- Review the outcome. If it does not make sense, begin again.
- Distinguish between decisions and outcomes. (Good decisions can have poor outcomes, and vice versa.)

*Intellectual and Social/Emotional Enrichment*

Understanding oneself depends, in part, on one's breadth and depth of experience. Gifted adolescents need to discover, explore, investigate, and participate in different types of activities, intellectual ideas, academic disciplines, extracurricular activities, and social relationships. The nature of the activity chosen depends, in large part, on the characteristics and needs of the student.

There are many ways a gifted student can explore a broad range of intellectual ideas, acquire depth of knowledge in an area of interest, socialize with intellectual and age-mate peers, and, in some cases, find mentors. Some needs can be met by activities planned by a family, some can be met by courses offered by the school system, and some require extensive investigation of available supplemental programs. If a family or guidance counselor decides that a student will benefit from supplemental programs, then university-based programs, regional talent search programs, and a variety of summer programs offer enrichment or acceleration.

*Learning about Colleges*

Learning about colleges is the second part of a broad-based approach to planning for college, designing career goals, and, ultimately, leading a personally satisfying life. The process can be organized into seven steps:

- Gathering information
- Planning and choosing
- Two visits
- Application
- Interview and essay
- Financial aid
- Decisions

Students can gather information by reading guidebooks and using multimedia resources, talking with people, and visiting colleges. A recent survey conducted by one college indicated that 49% of their 1996 freshman class obtained most of their information from the Internet. Even if this statistic was exaggerated, it is quite likely that students use the Internet as a major resource for gathering information. Students can design criteria that describe a college they might like to attend, and they can use one of the college-planning search engines to find schools that match their criteria. One of these sites provides a list that includes schools that match the student's credentials, schools where the student will almost definitely be accepted, and some schools that are slightly beyond the student's reach in terms of standardized test scores and other objective data.

Students can visit any one of many sites that provide an opportunity to take the SAT or ACT online. One site analyzes the student's answer sheet and provides feedback on how the student might raise scores. The Princeton Review, a major college-planning publisher, offers a "virtual nag" called "Remind-o-Rama." Students receive e-mail messages when important college-planning deadlines approach. Most colleges have a "home page," and provide online school tours. Tasks that once required hours in the library can be accomplished efficiently from a home or school computer. Where college planning is concerned, technology has made a significant difference. The appendix to this paper provides a list of college-planning sites on the World Wide Web.

By the end of 11th grade, students should be able to develop a list of 10 to 20 colleges based on personal criteria. To accomplish this objective, they need to learn about the different types of schools and their offerings, plan and choose the types of schools to visit, understand the type of information that can be obtained in a visit, develop an initial understanding of how schools select a freshman class, learn how to match their credentials to school offerings, decide which schools should be visited a second time, and learn to analyze and evaluate the information that was gathered. As students and their families begin to collect information about colleges, the following guiding questions can provide some structure:

- How do I want to live for the next 2 to 4 years?

- What are the different types of postsecondary education and how do schools differ in their offerings?
- What shall I look for during a campus visit?
- How does a college evaluate applications and choose a freshman class?
- What do I have that colleges want?

By the middle of 12th grade, students should be able to narrow their lists to five or six colleges by evaluating information about college offerings and the method used by colleges to select a freshman class. Reading college catalogs that describe the courses offered can help students assess a school's distribution requirements, the kinds of courses taught, and the sizes of various academic departments. A second visit to some schools can provide a taste of college life if the student stays in a dorm, and it can provide opportunities to meet with faculty members in areas where students might concentrate (e.g., an academic discipline, music, or art). The final list should reflect (a) personal values, interests, and needs; (b) the variety and range of available college opportunities; (c) realistic constraints such as cost and distance; and (d) five or six colleges that are appropriate. The group should include a "safety" school where the student will definitely be accepted, a "long shot" where admissions criteria are slightly beyond the student's credentials, and three or four colleges where admissions criteria match the student's credentials.

Students should understand that there is no such thing as the perfect school. The college experience, like life, is a series of trade-offs. Most gifted students should be able to identify several different types of schools appropriate for them. This does not mean that they would have identical experiences at each school, only that their experiences would be equally positive. Everyone should keep in mind that students respond differently to the increased independence of college. Some students who earned high grades in high school (a highly structured environment) continue to do well in college. But others have a difficult time with unexpected challenges. Some students who do not do well academically in high school are highly successful in college, in part because of a different structural organization than is provided by the average public high school.

The following guiding questions can provide some structure for 12th grade:

- How do I complete an error-free application?
- How can I effectively present my credentials?
- How can I secure strong recommendations?
- How shall I use the interview to my advantage?
- How do I write an effective essay?
- How can I pay for college?

Counselors, teachers, and parents are often surprised that gifted students have not matured as expected by their senior year in high school and that students' uneven developmental patterns and characteristics have complicated college planning. Despite everyone's best effort, the students may procrastinate until the 11th hour. Some counselors, familiar with the effort required to persuade these students to send for college applications, adjust their calendars to accommodate the last-minute paperwork. Teachers wonder how they will cover the required curriculum and assist students with writing the essay portion of the application. Parents become impatient as they realize the complexity of the application process and how little it resembles their own experiences. Parents may urge students to make an arbitrary decision based on cost or apply to colleges previously attended by family members.

Some gifted students may suddenly decide to accelerate and apply to college prior to senior year. Guidance counselors, teachers, and parents should assess the student's ability to live away from the family, establish social relationships in college, and set long-term goals to determine whether or not the student is emotionally as well as intellectually ready for college. Paula Olszewski-Kubilius (1995, 1997) indicated in a recent summary of research about early entrants that, academically, the evidence is overwhelmingly positive. Compared to typical freshmen, their grade point averages are higher and they are more likely to complete college. She also indicated that much knowledge has been gained about the conditions necessary for early entrance students to succeed.

**The Application Process**

The final step, the application process, can be looked on from two points of view: that of the multipotential gifted student, who may be able to make rational choices but whose options are

infinite; and that of the admissions officer, who may have to select the freshman class from a wide range of highly qualified applicants. The way the student addresses the application process may be the critical factor determining acceptance or rejection. The earlier information about this process is available, the better the student and his or her family and guidance counselor can plan an application strategy. (This does not mean gifted students should plan high school courses and extracurricular activities just to conform with college admissions policies.)

Two kinds of information are required on the typical application:

- Objective information including biographical data, information on academic performance, standardized test scores, AP exam grades, and so forth.
- Subjective information including extracurricular activities, recommendations, essay or personal statement, and a personal interview.

When academic credentials are roughly equal, subjective information and the method of presentation become deciding factors. (Sometimes geographic location or ethnic origin can tip the balance in favor of or against acceptance.) Recommendations might also make a difference if they have been written by individuals who know the student quite well. Students should obtain recommendations from adult leaders of special programs in which they participate during 9th, 10th, and 11th grades and file them for possible later use. Transcripts from out-of-school courses should be obtained and placed in the student's file along with course descriptions.

Colleges look favorably upon transcripts showing increasing academic rigor during 4 years of high school. An atypical course or low grade in an academic course should be accompanied by an explanation, particularly if it occurs during 11th or 12th grade. A period of illness during which a student falls behind and receives a poor or failing grade is a good example. Explanations are also useful if a student encounters family problems, overcomes difficulties, or maintains grades in spite of difficulties. Address these situations in an essay or personal statement.

Depth and scope of extracurricular activity are preferred to a "laundry list." Examples of initiative, leadership ability, and community service are particularly welcome. Documentation of activities may be critical. Students may, for example, enter a contest, submit work for publication, keep a scientific journal, or keep a notebook of artistic works.

The parts of the application should fit together to provide a common theme. Recommendations should support and be consistent with both the academic record and what the student says about himself or herself. For example, high test scores and a relatively low grade point average (GPA) provide an inconsistent picture and may suggest a problem (e.g., high ability but low motivation) to an admissions officer.

If a gifted student suddenly decides to apply to a particular college at the "eleventh hour," the Common Application, available online at http://www.nassp.org/services/commapp.htm, may suffice. If completing a written or typed application is a challenge, investigate MacApply, College Link, or other computerized methods of completing an application.

*How Candidates Are Evaluated*

Admissions offices at highly selective colleges or universities may read 40 applications a day, spending no more than 5 or 10 minutes looking at an application during the first reading. In some instances, initial reviews are performed by computers programmed to eliminate students who do not meet specific numerical criteria. This process is a distinct disadvantage to a gifted student whose academic credentials—GPA, class rank, or standardized test scores—are not reflective of the student's ability and potential. The admissions officer may look at the name of the student's school district to see if he is familiar with the quality of the education provided, then at the secondary or high school profile, and finally the student's academic performance. He follows this pattern because when a college accepts a student it gambles on the student's chances of succeeding. A student who performs consistently well all through high school is a much lower risk than one whose performance has been erratic. Even though a student's record may identify him or her as gifted (or enrolled in a special program), colleges will evaluate the student's credentials in the same manner as those of all other students.

*Academic Rigor.* Is there evidence of superior ability such as honors, gifted or talents (GT), or AP

courses? (Some colleges ignore honors or GT classes because they are of unknown quality.) Students should be alert to the difference between state academic requirements for high school graduation and requirements for admission to a selective college. Does the transcript reflect depth in areas such as foreign languages and mathematics? (Studying one language for 6 years is better than two languages for 3 years.) Does the transcript reflect quality? Did the student take four or five major subjects each year (English, mathematics, science, history, language) or a variety of nonacademic or elective courses (e.g., business law, fashion merchandising, gourmet foods, study hall)? If a high school does not include course descriptions with college applications and course titles do not accurately reflect quality, the student or counselor should attach an explanation to the transcript. Does the transcript reflect balance? Did the student take a broad curriculum (mathematics and science, history, and English courses) or concentrate too heavily in one area? And finally, does the transcript reflect a stable or upward trend? Are the student's grades improving or growing weaker each year? Recent performance is the most important indicator of current level of ability and motivation.

The most selective colleges are interested in evidence of high motivation and achievement—that is, high grades in very demanding courses. AP courses demonstrate that the student is capable of performing at a high level of academic proficiency. Results of AP examinations may result in advanced placement, credit, or both in college. If a student chooses not to take AP examinations, a high grade in an AP course is still considered evidence of superior ability. It is the student's responsibility—not the high school's—to see that AP scores and transcripts are sent to colleges. AP grades of 3, 4, or 5 may be accepted for exemption from required freshman courses or granting of college credit. Check a school's AP policy. Do not assume receipt of transcript credit.

*Standardized Test Scores.* Standardized test scores (e.g., PSAT, SAT, ACT) supplement transcripts and permit an admissions officer to compare applicants against a similar standard. The tests share a common characteristic: they are timed, primarily multiple-choice tests. Colleges vary in their use of standardized test scores. Some believe the scores predict college grades and use them as one criterion for admission decisions. Others place primary emphasis on high school academic achievement and AP and Subject Test scores, then look at subjective information such as the essay. Some large universities screen a vast number of applicants by combining each student's SAT or ACT score with GPA and class rank. They may accept or eliminate applicants strictly on the basis of these numerical scores. Students whose standardized test scores are not outstanding should understand this system so they can select appropriate matches. Students should ask how scores are used.

Should gifted students prepare for the SAT-1 by taking a course? Yes, if the student's verbal and mathematical abilities are very uneven, or if a student experiences severe test anxiety. However, students should always take practice examinations to become familiar with the test structure and instructions. Since some gifted students hate to leave an answer blank, understanding the structure will allow them to make more informed decisions on when to guess. Furthermore, gifted students often find reasons why more than one answer could be correct. This trait may cause difficulty when the student has to choose exactly one correct answer.

*SAT-II: Subject Tests.* Subject Tests, designed to measure the extent and depth of a student's knowledge in a particular academic subject, are required by many colleges. Some schools believe Subject Test scores are better indicators of knowledge than other standardized test scores. Students should ask how scores are used.

*Extracurricular Activities.* Most selective colleges ask students to list, describe, and sometimes comment on the significance of their extracurricular activities. They are interested in depth of commitment, personal initiative, originality, leadership ability, and evidence of a social conscience. The list does not need to be exhaustive to have an impact. Membership in several organizations is less impressive than a major contribution to one. Well-rounded activities indicate interest in a variety of endeavors, but intense concentration in one, if well documented, or participation in an athletic endeavor accompanied by a statement regarding its significance is just as impressive.

Technology has introduced a new dimension to documenting extracurricular activities. An autobiographical videotape or compact disc can

illustrate skills and abilities. However, electronic media is effective only if it demonstrates an aspect of the ability that cannot be demonstrated in any other way and relates to the ability to perform in college. For example, Gregg is an expert windsurfer. The admissions office receives a professional-quality videotape showing Gregg successfully navigating his way through relatively difficult surf. Although interesting, the videotape will probably have little impact on the deliberations of the admissions committee. If, however, Gregg adds a narrative describing the way windsurfing relates to his interest in physics, he will provide necessary meaning to his interest and credentials. In sum, a videotape does not necessarily demonstrate the capacity to be original and creative; it is a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

Submitting material that provides evidence of talent can be tricky. Admissions officers are flooded with tapes, portfolios, and home-baked bread. Students should ask if a college will accept supplementary material and how they can best present extracurricular activities and special talents. Any method that demonstrates the ability to perform in college and adds substance and consistency to the application is desirable. Supporting material must appear as evidence, not testimony; it must be the best work, and needs to be short and to the point. Most importantly, it must add something to the application that cannot be illustrated in any other way, and demonstrate, in some way, the student's ability to succeed at the school.

*Community Service.* An altruistic student who has contributed to community life without regard for compensation is more likely to contribute to campus life, be academically successful, and form a long-term attachment to the college or university. Therefore, volunteer activities should be documented in the application. A good example is talent in a particular sport combined with coaching young children after school. Another example might be expertise in developing computer programs that was shared by writing programs that helped a social agency save money. Letters of recommendation from a supervisor or agency director or treasurer should be in the file.

*The College Interview.* Students need to learn how to use the interview. The standard advice offered by well-intentioned people is "Be yourself," but that is much too general for gifted students; they think of too many alternatives. Gifted students may focus on one factor, such as how to dress for the interview, and then respond by swinging from one extreme to another. An interview practice session in which students role-play an admissions officer and an applicant is an ideal way to demonstrate this part of the application process. Guidelines for an effective interview should never program a student to ask specific questions or answer questions in a specific way. Admissions officers recognize and value spontaneity. Students should decide which questions are important; they should be made aware that certain types of questions are valued by highly selective colleges.

The factors that are important to each student will determine the degree to which the college interview provides information that results in a match. For example, a student may ask "What are the most recent experiences your college has had in placing graduates in jobs, professional schools, or graduate schools?" If an admissions officer values that type of question and provides an adequate answer (one that goes beyond information provided in the guides), the student will acquire valuable information and the admissions officer will have insight into what this student wants from a college. Students should check to see if on-campus interviews are offered. Many colleges now ask local alumni to conduct interviews.

Before the interview, students should construct an agenda that asks questions that cannot be answered by reading catalogs. For example, ask what percentage of the freshman class returns for sophomore year, or, if students do not return, does the college know why. Do not ask how many books are in the library (there are more than you can read). Construct an agenda that will answer the personal question "What does this institution offer that will assist me in reaching my goals?" Answer the interviewer's questions honestly. Prepare and rehearse, but don't overprogram yourself. Be prepared to present information about yourself that is not visible in your written application and supporting material. Remember, the admissions committee is struggling to decide "Which of these highly qualified applicants shall we admit, and which must we deny?" Write down your interviewer's name; write a thank-you note as soon as you return home.

*The College Application Essay.* The essay is the bane of every high school senior's college application. Some students refuse to consider colleges

where they might be extremely happy because an essay is required. Some write their essays the night before the deadline; others spend weeks writing and rewriting. Only the deadline puts an end to the agony.

Students with prior experience in writing will find that an autobiographical essay is a growth-promoting experience—after they overcome the anxiety produced by a series of open-ended, sometimes deceptively challenging questions such as "Tell us something about yourself that is not reflected in your application folder" or "Discuss your academic and professional goals." A student may have earned straight A's in a highly rigorous academic program, earned more than adequate standardized test scores, have a social conscience, and participate in many community activities, but still feel uneasy at the thought of outlining his or her academic and professional goals. How does one "evaluate a personal or educational experience" that has been "a major factor" in one's getting old enough to apply to college? Highly analytical and other gifted students may ask what this question has to do with one's ability to succeed in and contribute to a school. The more competitive colleges, however, require essays, detailed written analyses of extracurricular activities, or personal statements. They are asking the question "Who are you?" Students should be instructed to answer all questions, but particularly the one that reads "What can you tell us about yourself that we have not asked?" Taking the time to write an answer may make the difference between acceptance and rejection.

The key to writing a personal essay or statement is the ability to organize, reflect, and write autobiographically. Some gifted students have a difficult time when asked to reflect. If the essay is to make a significant difference to an admissions officer, they need to know themselves and they need writing practice.

The essay can be a decisive factor. It can reassure the admissions committee that the student is capable of college-level work. Student essays should be reviewed by teachers, counselors, and parents for spelling and grammar; students should not be instructed on the essay topic. Colleges review the essay looking for many things: writing ability, intellectual curiosity, initiative and motivation, creativity, self-discipline, character, capacity for growth, leadership potential, community service, and consistency with other elements of the application.

**What Students Need to Know**

Persuading a college or university to choose them requires students to know how to present themselves so that an institution will recognize them as a good match. Part of that presentation is based on what they know about themselves; part involves what they learn about how colleges make selections. Students need to know (a) who is involved in the admissions process, (b) how students are evaluated, and (c) what they can offer that a college requires and desires—the ingredients the institution is looking for in a balanced student body. Many college-planning guides provide slick marketing tips for college applicants. But unless the match is truly a good one—and there is no way of knowing that without going through the kinds of activities proposed in this paper—both students and institutions are likely to be disappointed.

Students who can ask and begin to answer questions about themselves are on the road to developing self-awareness. When they can begin to ask and answer questions about colleges and relate those answers to themselves, they are prepared to begin the college selection process. Students "discover" themselves—that is, they identify personal values, aptitudes, and needs—and they learn how to conduct a college search through a multistep process. Ideally, this process should begin by 7th grade, with specific events occurring each subsequent year. However, the process can be shortened; it is never too late to begin.

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## APPENDIX

### College-Planning Internet Resources

#### Electronic Resources

Electronic resources have come of age. The Internet provides opportunities that have never before been available, and its presence has significantly increased both our vocabulary and approaches to gathering information for the college-planning process. The terms "Web site" and "http" have become a familiar part of our lexicon. One can hardly turn on the television or read a newspaper or magazine without coming across the term "home page." Throughout the United States, schools and public libraries are getting connected.

With a computer, a modem, and Internet access, counselors, educational professionals, parents, and students now have access to a wide variety of electronic college-planning resources. The rapid growth of the Internet brought with it the capability to take a practice SAT online, search for financial aid, and "see" a college without ever leaving home. Most colleges have home pages. Like viewbooks, these home-page views can be misleading. The information has been carefully developed to display the image that a school wants people to see and to portray the school in the best possible light. Students and adults must become critical consumers.

The Internet has also increased our capability to find a wealth of up-to-date college-planning resources. The following list of college-planning resources is relatively easy to use, and the resources offer several advantages.

#### Advantages of Internet Use

- Find a variety of ways to begin the college-planning process.
- Select a group of colleges that match your criteria.
- Get college admission office addresses and telephone numbers instantly.
- Get comprehensive information about the colleges you select.
- Send an online application.
- Search for financial aid availability.
- Access college major and career-planning information.

- Chat with other prospective applicants or alumni.

Note. Students should avoid using the Internet for sending last-minute electronic applications because of the risks. For example, a university's server might not be working, or heavy "traffic" might interfere with electronic transmission or even disable a university's server computer.

**SAT and ACT Test Preparation**

- ACT

ACT, Inc., is an independent, nonprofit organization that provides educational services to students and their parents, to high schools and colleges, and to professional associations and government agencies. They are best known for their college admissions testing program.

URL: http://www.act.org/

- The College Board

The College Board offers substantive information, test-taking tips, and sage advice about both the SAT-I and SAT-II, and others tests as well.

URL:
http://cbweb1.collegeboard.org/sat/html/students/prep000.html

- Educational Testing Service (ETS)

ETS Net is a gateway to information about college and graduate school admissions and placement tests, with links to AP, GRE, GMAT, LSAT, SAT, the Praxis Series, and TOEFL sites, as well as other educational resources. ETS Net provides sample test questions, test preparation, and test registration. It also contains information on ETS research initiatives, teacher certification, planning, financial aid, and links to college and university sites.

URL: http://www.ets.org/

- Princeton Review

Take an online SAT, check results and analyses of previous SATs, learn test-taking tricks, and much more. A career inventory is linked (http://cgi.review.com/birkman/birkman.cfm) to the Princeton Review for students who are thinking in that direction.

URL: http://www.review.com/college/

- Testprep

PSAT and SAT Prep is sponsored by Stanford Testing Systems, Inc. When users follow the instructions for taking a prep test, Stanford Testing Systems software will diagnose weak areas and provide specific questions to strengthen scores.

URL: http://www.testprep.com/index.html

**College-Planning Internet Sites** (This list is not intended to be comprehensive.)

- College Board Online

The College Board is a national membership association of schools and colleges whose aim is to facilitate the student transition to higher education. They offer information tailored to students, parents, and teachers. Users can register for and practice for SATs. Financial aid information is available. College Board's new ExPAN is an information and search service where you can use a variety of criteria to find the right college.

URL: http://www.collegeboard.org/

- College Choice Web site

This is a very comprehensive college-planning Web site hosted by the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA. The information is categorized in an easy-to-use format, which makes it an ideal place to start.

URL: http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/mm/cc/home.html

- CollegeScape

A source of information about highly selective colleges and universities, this organization charges each college $1,500 when a student uses the online application, so the colleges listed are those that can afford to and want to pay a service fee.

URL: http://www.collegescape.com/

- College and University Home Pages

This site is a link to more than 3,000 college and university home pages.

URL:
http://www.gse.ucla.edu/mm/cc/links/schools.html

- The Consumer Information Center in Pueblo, Colorado

An informative publication, "Preparing Your Child for College," is available through the Internet from the electronic arm of the Government Document Distribution Center in Pueblo, Colorado.

URL: http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov

- Duke University Talent Identification Program (TIP)

TIP's college-planning pages include a wonderful FAQ titled "Dear Admissions Guru" that answers many common questions and a useful college search engine.

URL: http://www.jayi.com/ or
http://www.jayi.com/ACG/ques.html

- Go College

A commercial site that offers SAT practice tests on announced dates. They also offer simple and advanced searching for colleges that match the user's criteria and, for a fee, other services such as a searchable scholarship database.

URL: http://www.gocollege.com/

- Kaplan Education Center

This site, sponsored by Kaplan Test Preparation, provides a great deal of information about starting the college process. PSAT, SAT, and ACT information, and sample test questions are available, plus timely information on the college admissions process.

URL: http://www.kaplan.com/

- Lycos

Lycos is an index that lists college home pages by geographic location.

URL:
http://a2z.lycos.com/Education/College_Home_Pages/

- Petersons

Petersons is one of the most comprehensive college-planning sites. They have a search engine that allows the user to type in criteria and search for colleges that match. Financial aid information is included in their extensive offerings.

URL: http://www.petersons.com/

- Princeton Review

This site offers a search engine that lets you type criteria and then looks for schools that match. They also have a listing of "best" schools.

URL: http://www.review.com/college/

- The Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation

Texas Guaranteed Student Loan Corporation is a public, nonprofit corporation that administers the Federal Family Education Loan Program (FFELP) in Texas. Its information includes career-planning and college selection information. The Internet site is titled Adventures in Education.

URL: http://www.tgslc.org

- USNews (school rankings by category, financial aid, and more)

URL: http://www4.usnews.com/usnews/edu/

- Yahoo's College Select (information on colleges and the college-planning process)

One of the large directories of information, Yahoo has an information page on Education and has additional pages with information about preparing for college and about paying for college. They also provide information about College Honors Programs.

URL: http://yahoo.com/Education/

URL:
http://www.yahoo.com/Education/Higher_Education/Honors_Programs

**Financial Aid**

- College Guides and Aid

This commercial site offers some free services, some services for a fee, and an online college-planning bookstore with book reviews.

URL: http://www.collegeguides.com/

- Counseling Resources

URL:
http://www.cybercom.com/~chuck/guide.html#B

- FastWEB

This commercial site offers an extensive searchable database of sources for financial aid, including work study, scholarships, fellowships, internships, grants, and loans. Their services are advertised as free.

URL: http://www.fastweb.com/

URL: http://web.studentservices.com/fastweb/

- The Financial Aid Information Page

This site is sponsored by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators and has links to a wide selection of financial aid sources.

URL: http://www.finaid.org/

URL:
http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs/user/mkant/Public/FinAid/finaid.html

- The Illinois Student Aid Commission (ISAC):

The Illinois Student Aid Commission (ISAC) also provides information about preparing and paying for college.

URL: http://www.isac1.org

- The Student Loan Marketing Association (Sallie Mae):

The Student Loan Marketing Association (Sallie Mae) is a provider of financial services and operational support for higher education. Use the address below to access information offered by Sallie Mae on planning for college.

URL: http://www.salliemae.com

- U.S. Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education

This site offers a student's guide and other useful information.

URL: http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/index.html

URL:
http://www.ed.gov/prog_info/SFA/StudentGuide

**Other Useful and Interesting College-Planning Sites**

- A link to most universities and colleges, listed alphabetically and by state

http://www.utexas.edu/world/univ/

- Career Development Manual (A nice interactive guide to careers)

http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infocecs/CRC/manual-home.html

- Distance Education Clearinghouse

http://www.uwex.edu/disted/home.html

- A Comprehensive List of Distance Learning Sites

http://www.online.uillinois.edu/ramage/disted.html

- CampusTours

A guide to virtual tours at colleges and universities around the nation.

URL: http://www.campustours.com/

- Chuck Eby's Counseling Resources

The owner of this site provides a long list of links to college-planning sites categorized into Preparation, College Search and Information, College Information, and Special (e.g., historically black colleges and Business Trade & Technical Vocational Schools). Users will also find sources for study skills, financial aid information, career information, and resources for counselors and parents. The information has been kept up to date and is easy to use.

URL:
http://www.cybercom.com/~chuck/college.html

- Counselor-O-Matic

This service helps students select a range of appropriate schools: some that are "long shots," some that match the student's credentials, and some that are likely to be "safety schools."

URL:
http://www.review.com/time/counseloromatic/index.html

- Digital Campus

*Link* magazine's Digital Campus offers plenty of articles, links, and services relevant to U.S. college students.

URL: http://www.linkmag.com/

- The National Association of Secondary School Principals

Download the common application.

URL: http://www.nassp.org/services/commapp.htm

- *Getting Ready for College Early: A Handbook for Parents of Students in the Middle and Junior High School Years.* (August 1997). A useful book published by the U.S. Department of Education.

http://www.ed.gov/pubs/GettingReadyCollegeEarly/

- *How Can I Help My Gifted Child Plan for College?*

http://www.aspensys.com/eric/resources/parent/giftcoll.html

- *Preparing Your Child for College. A Resource Book for Parents,* 1996-97 Edition

http://www.ed.gov/pubs/Prepare/

- Princeton Review

RemindORama—a virtual nag! Register with this service and they will send you e-mail messages reminding you of critical college-planning dates.

URL: http://cgi.review.com/remind/

(If it doesn't work, try
http://cgi.review.com/remind/college/start3.cfm)

**WWW Search Engines and Directories**

World Wide Web search engines are used to search the Internet for information. They vary from one another; be sure to read the suggestions for searching that are available at each site.

- AltaVista—http://www.altavista.digital.com/
- Dogpile—http://www.dogpile.com
- Excite—http://www.excite.com
- Infoseek—http://www.infoseek.com
- Lycos—http://www.lycos.com/
- Magellan—http://www.mckinley.com/
- Snap Online—http://home.snap.com/
- Webcrawler—http://WWW.WebCrawler.com
- Yahoo—http://www.yahoo.com/

- And more . . . a variety of others can be seen at: http://cuiwww.unige.ch/meta-index.html or http://infopeople.berkeley.edu:8000/src/srctools.html

*Note:* The URLs were accurate and working when last checked. The Internet is a dynamic place, and changes take place rapidly and without warning. If you receive a message indicating that a URL cannot be found on the server, the server might not be accepting connections, or the URL might have changed. Try again later or truncate the URL to reach the site's home page. Truncating the URL means deleting the final portions of the address, leaving only the main part, or domain name. For example, the domain name for the College Board is www.collegeboard.org.

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